

**Can we know when to trust our emotions in the pursuit of knowledge? Consider History and one other area of knowledge.**

Emotions are a very powerful influence when encountering and analyzing new information. These emotions determine how we perceive a certain situation: positive or negative, good or bad, right or wrong. However, are those emotions always reliable? We trust and depend on our emotions every day, but should we?

Before going into more depth, let us look at situations when we do trust emotions. Perhaps the simplest example is our instincts, things we do automatically. For example, every normal person would pick up an abandoned baby out of a feeling of pity. Taking care of children is something that just seems right. Other situations where we trust our emotions are those of intuition. A few years ago, my Mom backed up her car and accidentally hit a little boy. She intuitively hit the break without a second thought. It was clearly an emotionally triggered reaction as there was no time for thought.

Having seen situations where emotions are clearly useful, we ask ourselves when do we not or should we not trust our emotions? A simple answer would be situations that leave time for thought; situations where reason, sense perception or language conflict with our emotions. For example, my emotions may tell me that someone is struggling based on their behavior even though reason tells me that everything appears to be going well in school as well as in friendships and at home. Equally, students will often be afraid of a test even if their reason tells them that they have studied everything on the syllabus. It is up to the individual to judge the reliability of their emotions in these situations.

We can judge how trustworthy emotions are through History. Personal history enables us to learn from past experiences as we see patterns of when our emotions were correct. This can be seen in the fact that my father is much better at judging a situation, and at what would probably be going on behind the scenes, than I am. He simply has more experience and knows when to trust his emotions and intuitions. However, he is still far from being infallible. When studying history, there are countless examples of people being misled by their emotions.

Perhaps the best example would be the influence of propaganda. Hitler expertly used propaganda to convince the population to support the Nazis and to hate Jews. Posters and radio messages would be displayed in a way aimed at triggering certain emotional reactions in people. An entire country was influenced to treat the Jews as subhuman and to blindly follow Hitler into a destructive war.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this appears to be a situation where one should not have trusted emotions and should have used reason instead. Reason would have shown the misleading use of language in newspapers and posters that glorified Hitler and would have analyzed events more critically. The individual nowadays would suggest relying on emotions was wrong in this situation. However, from Hitler's point of view, assuming he considered his actions to be moral, people were right to trust their emotions as he would have believed Jews were truly harming the people. This then raises the question of who should judge the reliability of our emotions? Different beliefs can lead people to different conclusions.

Having seen use of propaganda in the past, this now enables the recognition of propaganda nowadays. However, there are many limitations to the use of History to judge our emotions. Firstly,

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only a limited amount of information is delivered to us, depending on the amount recorded by historians and our personal effort to studying the past. Secondly, this information was selected depending on what the historian thought was significant and important details may have been left out. Thirdly, there are chances of misinterpretation, depending on the cultural background of the historian. For example, a Chinese communist would interpret the colour red to represent communism while a German with little political education might interpret this to be the colour of love. Language also has different connotations for a British and a Chinese writer. Problems can be increased if a text is translated; hidden meanings are often lost.

Not only learning how to trust emotions through History has limitations; our own emotions can make studying History less trustworthy. Recently, I read *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang and in part of the book she describes her disbelief at foreigners who actually believed the lies told by frightened prisoners, saying the regime was wonderful under Mao.<sup>2</sup> Her experiences under the regime gave her a completely different interpretation to the statements of prisoners. Ignorant foreigners unaccustomed to the repression felt under Mao naturally took these statements at face value. Chang's background would lead her to interpret things to suit her view of the regime while a foreigner reading these statements would perhaps misinterpret due to lack of experience with the Chinese ways. Thus, our own emotions and experiences can lead us to have completely different conclusions from the same statements. It is thus very important to be aware of one's background and to find out information from several sources to avoid misinterpretations due to different culture or experience.

**Kommentar [JK1]:** When do you capitalize history and when not?

Emotion is largely relied on in Ethics as well, being one of the key factors influencing our ethical decisions. Often our emotions are used to judge our actions. We *feel* that we should do something or we *feel* that something is wrong. In general, these emotions are not random. We feel bad about something based on experiences where we either saw bad effects of something similar or because we were told so by others. This raises the question if there is such a thing as intuitive knowledge of right and wrong. If universal values existed, our emotions would gain much credibility when trying to decide their trustworthiness in ethical decisions.

Unfortunately, feelings about situations often differ. How do we judge which person has the more trustworthy emotion? In *The Lord of the Rings*, Beregond the guard went against the steward's orders in order to save Faramir's life. However, other servants of the steward felt it was right to follow orders and would not let Beregond act. This inevitably led to conflict between the two parties and several people were killed.<sup>3</sup> This would be an example where both parties have justification: the servants believed in consistency and according to Kant would have acted morally by sticking to the rules. Beregond, however, had the justification of knowing Faramir would have died unless he had acted. This seems to be an example of moral relativism: both and yet neither parties are in the right. In this case, the disagreement was more harmful than if one had just given in to the other side. Looking at this example, when do we need to stick to our moral values and when do we need to compromise? Is it always possible to follow our instincts in a situation? If no one compromised, the world would be extremely chaotic. However, if everyone compromised, there would be little or no moral values.

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In order to judge our emotions in ethical decisions better, it is useful if we can identify the reasons for certain emotional reactions. For a long time I hated planes. I later realized that this was because I connected them with having to say goodbye. Knowing this, I can decide this to be acceptable or I can proclaim it to be silly and stop trusting my emotions when boarding planes. Hopefully then, these feelings will disappear after a while. In ethical decisions, similar methods can be applied, especially when emotional reactions stem from past experiences. Things become more complicated, however, when we have ethical values that were simply passed on to us by authorities such as parents and teachers. It is very difficult to judge rationally about such issues as emotions are often very strong. It is only when faced with opposing views that we often lack arguments to back our values. In such cases, trusting emotions equals trusting our authorities. Can we ever know how trustworthy our authorities are? How much of their values were simply given to them by their authorities? Often, the only way to judge these values is to observe the effects in our and other people's lives of following or not following these principles.

Although there are many ways of rendering some trustworthiness to emotions in the pursuit of knowledge, emotions will always stay biased and personal and thus often act as a barrier to an objective assessment of a situation. When studying History, we can see our emotions coloring the information we obtain but we can also learn to judge our emotions better through countless examples where emotions were relied upon. As Ethics is an area that cannot be proven by scientific means, emotions have more credibility. However, they can still often be seen to conflict and judgments of reliability are generally based on personal experiences and trust of authorities. Therefore, though often left with little alternatives to turn to, emotions are not very trustworthy. Humans are however extremely dependent on emotions. Does this make us undependable?